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Maestro

By Paperitalo Staff

Have you ever watched an orchestra conductor? They are the very image of composure and control. They don't look busy--but they are clearly in charge.

Why aren't more mill managers or site executives emulating the orchestra conductor? Many I see look more like firefighters than orchestra conductors. Yet, the conditions being managed as a mill manager should be more like an orchestra than a scene of chaos and destruction.

I don't know if I was a good mill manager or not (I suspect not) but I can sure tell you I didn't like the job because it was so boring. And that is the point--if your mill is under control, it should at least appear to be boring to the outsider.

Long ago, I and a site executive were in charge of a particular mill. When we got there, it was a scene of complete chaos. We worked like the devil for a number of months and things did not seem to get any better. By and by another fellow was hired to add to our team. We told him how hard everyone was working to turn the place around. After a couple of days, he strolled in and said, "No one is working hard around here except you two." There were approximately 800 people on the site.

He was right--and soon set us right about what were the priorities, how to control headquarters' endless micromanaging, how to hold people accountable at high standards and so forth and so on.

I can think of several current cases I know of where the mill manager is not maestro but firefighter. This is a condition whereby working harder will not cure--methods must be changed if the mill manager is going to survive.

Where to start? You have to train above yourself and below. Wean corporate from instantaneous responses. Don't do it all at once--they will notice. Rather, slow down your responses over a period of a month or so, so that you call back or respond to their emails right before lunch or right before quitting time (they want to go home, too). If you start to slow down and they notice, tell them you need to make sure you prepare a thorough and accurate answer for them (which is the truth). The point is, get back in control of your professional life by getting these people, especially the staff members that have nothing to do but sit around and fire questions at you, under control.

Next, set standards of performance for each of your direct reports. Don't do this with them--do it alone. Think about each of your direct reports and think about what you want from them. Think about timing, content and so forth. If you find yourself thinking, "yes, but _____ won't be able to do that" then you have a new problem to solve. Do they need to be replaced? Do they need more training? What is the deficiency, how and can it be corrected? When you have all of this straight for yourself, call them in for one-on-one meetings to explain the new rules.

At the same time as you are doing all of this, decide what you want out of your position for your career. Someday when, not if, you have to put it on a résumé, what are the five actionable results that show profit improvement or cost savings that you will be able to put on your résumé without exaggeration and which you will feel good about stating? You will have to do this, unless you die in your office (which is possible if you are in firefighter mode).

You cannot do it all. You are not supposed to do it all. Symptoms of problems include working more than sixty or so hours per week (notice, I did not say more than five days per week--you should show up on weekend days, too, but not all of them), being more than 24 hours behind on your voice messages and email messages, and having subordinates asking you for permission before they do anything. You, my friend, are out of control and headed down a path that will not end in a manner pleasing to you. Give me a call or send me an email if you need more help.

Be safe and we will talk next week. ##